

Strong connection in city's black population

BY COLLEEN PETERS

IN DECEMBER 1995, the Hon-ourable Jean Augustine — the first black Canadian woman elected to Parliament — put forth a motion to the House of Commons calling for the official recognition of Black History Month.

Black History Month dates back to 1926 when Harvard-educated African American historian, Carter G. Woodson, proposed setting aside a time devoted to honour the accomplishments of African Americans and to heighten awareness of black history in the United States. This led to the establishment of Negro Week in 1926. Celebrations of black history began in Canada shortly thereafter. During the early 1970s, the week became known as Black History Week and expanded to Black History Month in 1976.

A misperception that black people are new to Canada exists; this is based on the largest wave of black people coming to Canada through immigration over the last 50 years.

Black people have been a part of Canada since the 1600s. The population increased with the first wave of black people being brought here as slaves by the British during the American Civil War. The second wave of black people arrived when immigration policies opened in the '70s and '80s which brought a large Caribbean population to Canada. For myself, a first generation Canadian on my father's side, Black History Month is an opportunity to not only recognize black people in Canada but also share the uniqueness and diversity of culture of black people across the world.

True history shows us the origin of culture; knowledge passed down through the teaching of traditions shared generation onto generation is how we strengthen our roots.

Black History Month is an opportunity for me to share my traditions with others while learning about theirs. It also highlights the impact of my ancestors being stolen from Africa and being brought to the Caribbean for slavery, and how that bred to the diver-



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Thunder Bay's Anti-Racism and Respect Committee and Diversity Thunder Bay produce this monthly column to promote greater understanding of race relations in Northwestern Ontario.

sity of not only traditions and cultural practices/beliefs for black people around the world but our experiences and worldviews as well.

The black population in Thunder Bay is not as large in comparison to other ethnic groups; the population includes first generation black Canadians, and those from Africa and the Caribbean.

Even though the population is small, our community connection as black people is strong; I did not find my community, my community found me. It is here in Thunder Bay that I found myself, largely through learning my cultural identity. It is here I learned to accept myself through being embraced by my community. It is here I found the black mentors and elders I needed to teach and connect me to my ancestors supporting my development and growth; and it is here I've learned the most about my heritage and culture than anywhere else.

I hope that I can give back which was given to me, to the growing black youth population in our city.

Black History Month in Thunder Bay has historically been celebrated at CAMAT's signature event — the Annual Black History Month Dinner and Gala. This year CAMAT is excited to announce that a series of events has been planned inviting community members to learn about Canadian black history, as well as some of the different cultural practices and traditions from Africa and the Caribbean. From

ceremony to fashion, and food to art; we invite everyone to join us in the celebration of Black History Month at any of our events.

History, culture, and community come together under one roof during the annual Black History Month Dinner and Gala.

The evening includes authentic African and Caribbean cuisine; live musical performances; dance performances; and a fashion show. Bursaries from the CAMAT Scholarship Fund will be presented to recipients attending post-secondary school.

For more information regarding Black History Month events, visit CAMAT's website: www.camatnetwork.com. Proceeds from the gala support the CAMAT Scholarship and Family Funds that aim to support individuals and families of African and Caribbean heritage.

CAMAT aims to create a welcoming presence throughout the city of Thunder Bay where multiculturalism, diversity, community and racial harmony matter.

Colleen Peters is president of the Caribbean African Multicultural Association of Thunder Bay. The views and opinions expressed in this column are those of the author.

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